

1903 - Theodor Herzl met Witte - Russian Minister of Finance

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Herzl: On Sunday the 9th I drove to the Isles to see Witte. He received me at once, but was not amiable at all. A tall, ugly, coarse, serious person, about 60 years of age. A peculiar flattened nose, knock-knees, deformed feet which cause him to walk clumsily. More on his guard than Plehwe, he sat with his back to the window, so that I sat there in full daylight. He speaks a very bad French. At times he strained and moaned for a word in an almost comical fashion. But since I took no liking to him, I let him groan.

He began by asking me who I was (despite the introduction!), and when I had briefly presented myself and the cause - the latter from the governments point of view - he took the floor for a lengthy speech.

Witte: Don't say that this is the view of the government. It is only the view of certain individuals in the government. You want to lead the Jews out of the country? Are you a Hebrew? With whom am I speaking, anyway?

Herzl: I am a Hebrew and the leader of the Zionist movement.

Witte: And what we say remains between us?

Herzl: Absolutely! I said, and so emphatically that from that point on he spoke quite freely. He began with a presentation of the Jewish Question in Russia.

Witte: There are prejudices, he said in his miserable French. There are honest prejudices and dishonest prejudices. The Czar has honest prejudices against the Jews. There certainly cannot be any doubt of the Czar's honesty, for he is above everything. The anti-Jewish prejudices of the Czar are mainly religious in nature.

There are also prejudices that are materialistic in origin, caused by Jewish competition. Then there are people who are anti-Semites because it is fashionable to be. Finally, there are those who are anti-Semitic for business reasons. Especially journal-ists are in this class. One of the filthiest is a certain Grund (I think that was the name), who edits a paper in Moscow. It is true, he is a baptized Jew, but he has retained all the Jewish characteristics - I mean the bad ones - and reviles the Jews. A very mean fellow.

Herzl: Something like Arthur Meyer of the Gaulois, then?

Witte: Even worse. But it must be admitted that the Jews do provide reason enough for hostility. There is a characteristic arrogance about them. Yet most of them are poor, and because they are poor they are dirty and make an offensive impression. They also engage in all sorts of nasty pursuits, like pimping and usury. So that the friends of the Jews find it hard to come to their defense. I myself - (after the preamble, this was unexpected) - am a friend of the Jews.

Herzl: (I couldn't suppress the thought: how then do the enemies talk?)

Witte: It is hard, he continued, to stand up for the Jews, for then people immediately say that one has been bought. As for me, I am not worried about it. I have that kind of courage. Then, too, my reputation as a respectable person is too firmly established for any-one to hang anything on me. But faint-hearted people and those on the make let themselves be influenced by this and prefer to turn against the Jews. Lately, another weighty factor has been added: the participation of the Jews in revolutionary movements. While there are only 7 million Jews among our total population of 136 millions, their share in the membership of the revolutionary parties is about 50 per cent.

Herzl: To what circumstance do you attribute this, Your Excellency?

Witte: I believe it is the fault of our government. The Jews are too oppressed. I used to say to the late Emperor Alexander III: "Your Majesty, if it is possible to drown the 6 or 7 million Jews in the Black Sea, I have absolutely no objection to it. But if it isn't possible, we must let them live." That has continued to be my view. I am against further oppression.

Herzl: But what about the present situation? Do you think that the present situation is tenable?

Witte: Certainly. Russia has a resiliency of which people abroad have no idea. We can endure the greatest calamities for a very long time.

Herzl: I am not speaking of Russia, but of the Jews. Do you believe that the Jews will be able to endure this desperate state of affairs much longer?

Witte: What way out is there?

Herzl: I now presented the way out, answering all his familiar objections with my long-prepared arguments. But I recognized in his objections the views of the rich anti-Zionist Stock-Exchange Jews, who had evidently instructed him in Zionism. It was all there, even that old chestnut about the ambassadorial post.

Witte: He said: "Twenty years ago I spent some time at Marienbad with a Jewish deputy from Hungary. What was his name, now?"

Herzl: "Wahrmann"?

Witte: That's it. Even then people were talking about the creation of a Jewish State in Palestine, and Mr. Wahrmann said that if this came about he would want to be the Austrian ambassador at Jerusalem. It is clear that Wahrmann must have said, "the Jewish ambassador at Pest."

Herzl: It is clear that Wahrmann must have said, "the Jewish ambassador at Pest." Mr. Witte told the story badly.

Then I took his arguments by the throat just as fast as he presented them and demolished them. More and more he admitted that I was right. He clung only to the Holy Places (like all the Jewish bankers).

No anti-Semite has ever stubbed his toe on them - only he, the friend of the Jews. Finally, he asked me what I wanted from the government. Certain encouragement. I said

Witte: But the Jews are being given encouragement to emigrate. Kicks, for example.

Herzl: To this stupid brutality I replied by drawing myself up, calm and frigid, and saying icily: That isn't the sort of encouragement I want to talk about. That sort is well known.

And I developed the three points of my memorandum to Plehwe. Witte ended by admitting that my solution would be a good one if it could be carried out. I asked him, by way of supporting our movement, to withdraw the ban on the shares of the Jewish Colonial Trust. He promised to do so on condition that we establish a branch in Russia (which we actually want ourselves), so that our transactions could be supervised. I accepted this condition at once.

Thus this disagreeable man had actually promised me what I wanted, after all. This conversation too had lasted for an hour and a quarter. I rose from my chair. He shook hands with me several times and accompanied me as far as the stairs, which seems to be a lot for this boor, since he is in the habit of dispatching even visiting Excellencies while standing.